The War Ahead And The Way Ahead

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War is fought on the strategic, operational and tactical level. Although nuclear planning often dominates the military professional's view of the strategic level of war, the strategic level of war is primarily concerned with how the entire nation supports the war and handles the war's impact on foreign relations, domestic politics, economics, education, transport, trade, banking and taxation. The operational level of war is concerned with the management of campaigns and, in the United States Armed Forces, is conducted by echelons above Corps. The tactical level of war, in the view of the United States Armed Forces, is the business of divisions and below. As the US Army goes through transformation, there is no apparent move to adjust these levels or definitions to fit the Units of Action and Units of Employment structure.

Pinning the level of war on force size reflects the emphasis of force-on-force combat with operational planning focusing the synchronized application of combat power to break enemy formations. Since the events of 9/11, the US military has fought an inherently more complex conflict in disparate theaters against a range of opponents which seldom resemble the conventional armies of the industrial era. Fighting terrorism now means dealing with insurgencies. In these conflicts, the political dimension takes on greater import and the military response has to be shaped to fit the desired political outcome in regions that are quite distinct and profoundly different culturally from the United States and the modern West.

There are active insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although the conditions are better suited for an insurgent in Afghanistan, there is a much-lower intensity of insurgency being mounted there. This is primarily due to Afghanistan's war weariness after several decades of kaleidoscopic conflict and their lack of social progress under a succession of externally-imposed and internally-generated regimes. The insurgency in Iraq is more intense, but the Iraqi insurgency lacks many of the likely prerequisites for a successful insurgency. At this stage, there is no evident sanctuary area across an international boundary. There is no major power providing arms, medical support and training across an international boundary. The insurgency is primarily found among the Sunni Arab minority–a minority with a history of privilege and power over their Shia, Kurdish and Assyrian countrymen. Their base for popular expansion is constrained and attacks against other ethnic or religious groups can only invite serious retaliation. The insurgency is urban-based, rather than rural- based–historically a recipe for defeat. There are thousand of eyes in the cities and the government has the advantages of mass and movement in the cities. The insurgency is not a coherent, well-organized effort. There is no apparent insurgent national strategy or overarching ideology. Insurgent force organization is primarily at the squad and platoon level.

How then do the insurgents believe that they can defeat the United States? They apparently believe that they can use tactical success for operational and strategic impact. The United States, on the other hand, is conducting a tactical fight, but is it engaging the insurgents on the operational or strategic levels? Now insurgency is primarily a tactical fight militarily and, in Iraq, the divisions are responsible for the tactical fight. CENTCOM is the operational headquarters and is responsible for the overall military effort. The administration is responsible for the strategic fight.

Getting In

In the aftermath of 9/11, the administration correctly focused its attention upon the immediate threats posed by Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda believed that the United States was a casualty-averse paper tiger. Looking at Somalia, they saw how the US aborted its mission and left after losing 18 dead. Subsequent attacks on the American Embassies in Africa and on the USS Cole drew only feeble retaliation in the form of ineffective cruise missile attacks on tents and a pharmaceutical factory. This apparent lack of resolution convinced the Al Qaeda leadership that an attack on America proper would result in a cringing nation ready to accept the demands of Al Qaeda—withdrawal from Saudi Arabia, abandonment of Israel, economic and military withdrawal from the Middle East, payment of premium rates for energy and the like. This was a strategic miscalculation. Somalia was a humanitarian mission gone bad–and if the locals would rather kill than feed their own, a plague on all their houses. America had been attacked and the nation was at war.

On the strategic level, the administration has not asked for sacrifices from the US civilian population. The president responded to 9/11 by asking the American people to be vigilant at home but to go out and spend to keep the economy going and to not savage their fellow Americans who worshiped Allah. On the operational level, CENTCOM planned and launched Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan and later Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in Iraq.

The countries were quickly occupied. Since then, insurgencies have grown in both countries, but is the insurgency being treated as a series of campaigns or as a tactical problem? In both cases, a cardinal issue is the exact source and nature of the emerging insurgency in terms of the political-military objectives of the opposing side. The question now is whether the paper tiger model from Somalia drives the current insurgency in Iraq. Given the complex elements that make up that resistance, which includes Baathist holdouts, Sunni nationalists and fundamentalists, criminal elements, and foreign jihadists, is it correct to assume that the insurgent strategy is still driven by just inflicting casualties upon US forces? Or has the game changed?

The evidence is that the game has changed. Iraqi historical experience is less about casualties than the unwillingness of the colonial power to keep large numbers of its own forces in country for a long time. Winston Churchill, while serving as Colonial Secretary, responded to the Iraqi insurrection with few British troops, more local militia, and air power. The insurgent goal is not just body count but also keeping forces tied up in theater for a long, long time. If the insurgents think that the US will leave or reduce its numbers significantly in the short term – then they will attack and humiliate the Iraqi military before it can get its confidence and become a professional,

competent opponent. Eventually, cost and public support will determine the size of the US force deployed in theater and not US deaths.

Enter the IED

The insurgents determined that direct battle with US and coalition forces was going to result in defeat, so they began a war of guerrilla attrition, employing long-range attacks with rockets, mortars and RPG-7s. They also began mining the roads and using Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs–basically home-made bombs) to attack the US weakness–its supply columns and support traffic.

The IED battle is an evolving dialectical contest between the bomber and the target. It began with hard-wired IEDs. When the target began looking for wires, the bombers began using garage door openers, cell phones or toy car remote controls to detonate the devices. US Forces then began jamming these frequencies or broadcasting them in order to detonate the devices prematurely. The bombers then started hard-wiring the IEDs and burying the wires. The US science community is now working on a variety of bomber counters such as explosive sniffers, improved armor, EOD robots and remote circuit detectors. Field commanders are using increased patrols, CCTV, bulldozed and cleared roadsides and increased air transport to counter the threat. Each of these responses will eventually be offset through a change in bomber tactics or technology. The real question is, what does the enemy do during the interval when the counter is effective?

The first answer is to change the target. If the US forces are suddenly IED-proof, then other coalition forces or the Iraqi military are still vulnerable since the US will equip its forces first. Once the coalition and Iraqi military are safe, the shift will be to Iraqi police, frontier and customs forces, NGOs, commercial transport, school buses or whatever. The purpose of the IED is to demoralize, to create a feeling of insecurity and to make people timid and cautious, not to destroy a fighting force. Should a counter somehow make all of Iraq IED-proof, the next answer is to change the locale. IEDs might then appear in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Indonesia or Spain.

US vehicle-hardening and tactics have decreased the effectiveness of IED attacks, but this is not that important in the insurgents' vision. The insurgent does not need to destroy the occupation forces to be successful–they only need to create insecurity and instability. The IED, regardless of its effectiveness, causes apprehension among the coalition forces, consumes or occupies major amounts of resources and, most importantly, gives the insurgent exposure in the media and information battle.

Short of an all-terrain, all-weather 100% effective IED counter, the IED will remain the insurgents' primary weapon for the foreseeable future. They are easy to assemble, the components are plentiful and the risks of a failed attack are low. From a cost/benefit perspective, the IED has a much higher expected value than more conventional attacks and has the benefit of little risk to the insurgent. It does not require a large, well disciplined force. It is perfect for the loosely knit insurgency of Iraq. The insurgent shift to targeting Iraqi security forces with IEDs is not only due to decreased coalition vulnerability thanks to improved coalition equipment and

tactics. It is also due to insurgent fears that a strong and confident Iraqi security force will bring security and stability.

The Iraqi insurgency has used the IED as the main means to combat coalition troops and, increasingly, Iraqi security forces. However, normal Iraqis are feeling more animosity toward the insurgents as civilian casualties grow from the IED attacks. This growing animosity will work against the use of IEDs. The best IED-counters pale in comparison to angry citizens upset about problem makers in their own communities. Iraqi on Iraqi violence has a much greater impact on the Iraqi civilian community than Iraqi on American violence.

Should the counter void the effectiveness of all IEDs everywhere, the enemy has two choices–wait it out until the counter can be overcome or resume the attack by other means. Resuming the attack by other means will most likely involve the mass use of simple, available technology–the RPG-7 employed in mass groups, the explosive charge built into new construction and the suicide bomber. Demoralization of the force with cheap drugs is a more subtle approach. The enemy will attack the weak points–not in the hope of defeating the force, but of demoralizing it. Chemical or biological attack will probably remain a fantasy, although infrequent attacks on dining facilities and the like are possible. The war is now being fought at the psychological level and the most effective weapons will serve that fight.

Facing the Future

The insurgents look at what aided past insurgencies–the Mujahideen against the Soviets in Afghanistan, the Palestinian and Israeli insurgents against the British, the Adenese and Yemenese insurgents against the British, the Egyptians against the British, the Kashmiris etal against the Indians and the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong against the Americans. What mattered most to the guerrillas was not tactical victory. In fact, tactical victory was superfluous. What mattered most to the insurgent was survival. The Viet Cong insurgency effectively committed suicide in the Tet offensive in search of tactical victory. The North Vietnamese carried on with a conventional jungle war against the Americans. The demise of the Viet Cong was converted into a psychological blow against continued US involvement in South Vietnam–hawking the popular uprising that never occurred.

There is no North Vietnamese Army to carry the load in Iraq, but the local insurgents have not destroyed themselves either. The insurgents are faced with a weak Iraqi National Army and police force that can be compromised before they ever get into the field and become effective. The way to compromise the security force is to split the country on religious and ethnic lines and so undermine the new government's instruments of compellence . On the assumption that the US will draw down and gamble on training effective Iraqi forces quickly, the insurgents will attempt to preempt the effectiveness of the new force by initiating a civil war. Larger regional implications, religious differences and the chance to draw Iran and/or Turkey into the conflict would serve their ends.

What the insurgents need is a war-weariness among the American populace and a murderous frustration among the Iraqi civilian population. IEDs haved filled that role–not for the harm that they do but for the steady casualty rate they produce and the repetitive broadcasts that they get in

the news. The insurgents are attempting to attack the US on the operational level by demoralizing the forces with the IED threat and the strategic level by sapping the will of the US population through a protracted conflict. The US responds to the IED threat on the tactical level alone, treating it as a force protection issue. As such, the US has been tactically successful and the bombers have now turned to targeting other, less-protected groups–the Iraqi Armed Forces, the Iraqi police, Iraqi government, NGOs and civilians. The US concern for force protection does not extend equally to these groups. This is more than a tactician's war. It should be a series of campaigns leading to Iraqi and Afghan control of their own countries and local defeat of the insurgency.

The Iraqi insurgents would like to land a strategic psychological blow against America. Homeland Defense has made this difficult. Tactical attacks, such as the use of anthrax or poisons in a US Armed Forces dining facility or the detonation of explosives which have been incorporated in the construction of a new building may produce tactical effects which can be turned to strategic advantage. However, the main targets are now the indigenous forces, the infrastructure, the economy and the civilian population.

The information war is an important component of the on-going psychological contest. Much depends on comprehending what Iraq's diverse and traumatized population understands to be a better future. Kurds, Shia and Sunni Arabs of different tribes and clans from town and cities will have to engage in those discussions. Winning this war will require an effective partnership between US-led coalition and the newly elected Iraqi government. Victory will depend on our partner's able to mobilize Iraqi society to build a better future, stand up an effective security force to resist the insurgency, and isolate those now under arms. The insurgency's only hope is to demoralize the Iraqi troops, police, and populace before that can happen. This will not be an easy fight but it is one that can be won.